

## **Behind the Scenes of a Mastermind: Hitchcock's Fame in Three Acts**

An Essay by Ashley Bowman

Ask just about anybody if they know who Hitchcock was, and you will get a nod or a, "Yeah, the director, right?" Then ask them what he is famous for as a director and you might be surprised by the number of blank or searching stares that you receive in response. Why is this? Probably because Hitchcock was not famous for anything that was already established or well known. Hitchcock was essentially famous for being Hitchcock. He was a forerunner for modern cinema and revolutionized the movie industry during his career in numerous ways. He helped pioneer the thriller and was undoubtedly the first to master the genre. He also approached film from a completely different way than the mainstream filmmakers in the industry during his era. Hitchcock approached stories from darker perspectives; he made the audience wonder just how far they would bend the rules in certain circumstances if they were faced with similar dilemmas; he humanized many of his villains and gave them almost likable qualities. His name would become a synonym for certain styles and techniques in cinema, and the term "Hitchcockian" is still used. Hitchcock would be established as one of the most famous directors to ever live, and this was because of three essential dynamics of his life: his unique history, his incredible talent and dedication and, of course, timing.

In order to fully appreciate cinema after Hitchcock's arrival on the scene, cinema has to be somewhat explored pre-Hitchcock. Gerald Mast in his book *A Short History of the Movies* comments on the progression of cinema. After cinema became a reality, thanks to pioneers like Edison and the Lumière brothers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it immediately started to develop and progress at alarming speeds (Kawin and Mast, 21-23). In 1912 a six reel film titled *Queen Elizabeth* would squash the perceived myth that



people would not sit through a long film and the feature film was introduced (43-44). David Wark Griffith, one of Hitchcock's biggest inspirations, would break into this new concept fully and be the first truly successful feature film director. He began experimenting with longer films in 1912, but it was his infamous classic *The Birth of a Nation*, done in 1914 (57-60). Although it was extremely controversial because of its deliberate racism, it was extremely successful despite it being 190 minutes long. It is respected as a revolutionary film in cinema, despite its content because Griffith used a lot of very unique techniques for laying out the story and filming his shots. *The Lonedale Operator* and *Lonely Villa* of 1911 showed that Griffith had an ability with "pure stories of suspense", and that he could develop "human detail... realistic texture, and [strong] narrative construction" (53). This was probably due to the length of the film. In *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, an author writes, "feature films... deployed their formal elements to further character development and motivation" (Nowell-Smith 41).

When talking about his 1912 work *The New York Hat*, Mast says of Griffith that he "put human flesh on the story's potentially bare bones" (53). This ability is possibly why Griffith was one of Hitchcock's inspirations. In an interview with Alfred Hitchcock, which can be found in Truffaut's book *Hitchcock*, Truffaut says to Hitchcock, "You've often been quoted as having said: 'Like all directors, I was influenced by Griffith.'" In response Hitchcock says, "I especially remember *Intolerance* and *A Birth of a Nation*" (Truffaut 19).

It is not very surprising to discover this when the two men are compared. Both thought outside of the cinematic box of their era. Griffith's movies were representations of himself and he used cinema as an expressive outlet for his opinions and ideals. This did not always serve him, but he recognized the coexistence of cinema as an art form while also acknowledging it as a money maker.



Hitchcock also had this unique ability. His films gained significant popularity, more so than Griffith even, while also constructing and crafting his films through his own personal and unique filters. Both explored the human experience fully, from multiple angles, though Hitchcock more so, and to a much greater degree. They were pioneers, undoubtedly, in their respective times, and both would not only change the industry forever, but be remembered and respected for doing so. The influence of Griffith is apparent in Hitchcock's works, and though Hitchcock's style might not be adapted from his, he approached cinema with the same mindset to push the envelope and do something bigger, greater, better or fresher than the last guy.

Film, until sound became the expected norm in the late 1920's and early 1930's, was silent. "Griffith, Sennett, and Chaplin were the three major artists of the moving picture's second decade", all masters of silent film (Mast, 93). Chaplin brought vaudeville to motion pictures and married humor with sincerity about the human condition. This approach was massively popular. Griffith's strength was in creating mass amounts of likable films that helped to boost the industry of film in the United States, and bring them to the foreground of cinema in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These men were all part of "the secret of the American rise" which was marketing and portraying film as "both art and industry" at the time (93).

In England, during World War I, American cinema flourished, while the British industry floundered. In the midst of war, the film industry could not be a significant worry, and so American films "ruled the screens of America and Europe" at that time (93). One very enthusiastic movie goer during this time was a young, impressionable Alfred Hitchcock. After the war, however, cinema began to take an important shift in Europe. Films began to change from eventful narratives and entertaining stories to art. Artistic movements and forms would begin to take shape within this new medium, and undoubtedly have an impact on



mainstream film everywhere. The directors of this time, directors like Hitchcock, would latch very strongly onto this shift and master it. In a book titled *Alfred Hitchcock and the British Cinema* by Tom Ryall, the author begins chapter two by saying:

Hitchcock worked within the entertainment film industry making pictures which were aimed at a mass audience. Yet many of his films, particularly those of the 1920s, display clear relationships with the European 'art' cinemas of the period which constituted the focus of interest for the minority film culture in Britain that was centred on the film society movement and the specialized journal (Ryall 7).

Hitchcock would have a unique influence over American industrialized cinema, where the goal is to make more and sell more, by being able to incorporate his European art background and knowledge into his mass production films. Though he would become infamous in American cinema, Hitchcock's European start and influence was something that was unique to his process and the films that he brought to the screen.

Hitchcock's upbringing probably aided greatly in his unique films and style. He was a Catholic in England, which was not common and probably was somewhat of a burden or a source of division from others, at times. Hitchcock himself said, "Ours was a Catholic family in England, you see, this in itself is an eccentricity," when talking about his unique personality growing up (Truffaut 17). He also describes himself as "a loner", highly introverted with no "playmate[s]" as a child. Rather Hitchcock said, "I played by myself, inventing my own games" (17).

He also was not particularly brilliant, academically speaking, but considered himself "rather average" (Truffaut 18). In



his interview with Truffaut he acknowledged that he “had scientific leanings”, and talked about his “practical knowledge of engineering, the theory of laws of force and motion, [and] electricity” and how he got it. After he became proficient in engineering he went to the University of London and studied art. His mingling of science and art prepared him for cinema, as England was emerging from a very technical stage of early cinema into a more expressive artistic phase, or rather phases. Hitchcock would have the education to assist his already very creative mind in being a very holistic director later in life. Cinema can be very detailed and intricate and any person that can master multiple aspects of it would have something unique to offer. This is what Hitchcock did. He was artistic, and even broke into motion pictures by drawing captions for silent films, but he was also able to structure scenes and dialogue as an engineer might. He had an artistic and scientifically theoretical mind that could aesthetically connect the audience to the subject while also making utter sense.

Alfred Hitchcock was a film enthusiast from the beginning. “From the age of sixteen on I read film journals,” he told Truffaut, explaining, “not fan or fun magazines, but always professional and trade papers” (Truffaut 18). So Hitchcock was developing, studying and honing his interest in motion pictures before he was in motion pictures. In the same interview he talks about going to the movies by himself and says, “though I went to the theater often, I preferred the movies and was more attracted to American films than to the British” (18). The influence and desire to be part of the American film industry probably developed as early as these days of his upbringing, before he entered the constantly expanding and exciting world of cinema.

Interestingly, Hitchcock got into the industry in a fairly insignificant way, that would later open into opportunity after opportunity. When he was in University studying art, he was given a job in the advertising department, designing ads for electric cables. While doing this he read in a trade paper that “Paramount's Famous Players-Laskey” was coming to London to



open a branch and Hitchcock made up several drawings of "captions that covered the dialogue in silent pictures" for a film they were planning to make (Truffaut 19). He took his pictures to the company and was "put... on at once" (19). It was here, creating drawings for silent films, that Hitchcock began to absorb everything that he could about the inner workings of cinema, and also where he began to meet people that could have some influence in his future and show him into the industry. "At this time I met several American writers and I learned how to write scripts," Hitchcock shares, "and sometimes when an extra scene was needed—but not an acting scene—they would let me shoot it" (19).

It was when the British companies assumed control over the "Islington" Paramount studio that Hitchcock got his first job as an assistant director (Truffaut 19). He worked with people like Seymour Hicks and Michael Balcon. In 1922 he wrote his first movie script adapted from a play called *Woman to Woman*. He describes his involvement to Truffaut:

I was twenty-three at the time, and I'd never been out with a girl in my life. I'd never had a drink in my life. The story was taken from a play that had been a hit in London. It was about a British Army officer in World War I. On leave in Paris he has an affair with a dancer, then he goes back to the front. He is shell-shocked and loses his memory. He returns to England and marries a society woman. And the the dancer turns up with child. Conflict . . . the story ends with the dancer's death. (Truffaut 20)

A lot can be seen about Hitchcock's early career from this description. He was still somewhat inexperienced and learning to navigate, not only the industry, but life. From this account it



becomes clear that Hitchcock made his biggest transitions from young man to adult, growing and adapting with cinema.

It was during *Woman to Woman* that he would meet his wife, Alma Reville, who was the “script girl” and editor of the film. Their union and her strengths and personal expertise were also likely a strong influencer in Hitchcock's works. In the recent film *Hitchcock* about his life, particularly pertaining to his later days and the making of *Psycho* his wife is portrayed as a vital part of his process (Hitchcock 2013). He says of her in his interview with Truffaut, “as you know, I always make my fiancée (wife, later) do all the dirty work,” when talking about being on location with her while filming one of his movies.

Another influential character in Hitchcock's life, that likely had some impact on how he perceived and depicted the world in his films, was his father. He describes his dad as, “a rather nervous man”, and tells Truffaut that his father's nickname for him was “little lamb without a spot” (Truffaut 17). His dad was a catholic and viewed by many as “strict” (17). The contrast between his strict catholic father and progressive artistic England would create a dichotomy to Hitchcock's personality, and invariably, his films.

“I was put into school very young,” Hitchcock reveals as he explains that he went to a Jesuit school in London and that “it was probably during this period... that a strong sense of fear developed—moral fear—the fear of being involved in anything evil” (Truffaut 17-18). This moral awareness and sensitivity to “evil” and “fear” is something that many would argue is apparent and hyper developed in his films. It is possibly one of his *most* defining qualities because it adds so much to his uniqueness. It was another way in which his very specific and singular upbringing shaped him as a filmmaker; a reality that is in part responsible for his very different approach to cinema. He was simultaneously sensitive to the moral dilemmas of humanity and any deviant behavior in society.



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Another factor of Hitchcock's fame was his talent. He approached things vigorously and very analytically. He *studied* everything and every process. He read technical works by the age of sixteen, learned and practiced script writing before he was eighteen, and acted as an art director and script writer for a major production company in his early twenties. His ambition and talent propelled him through the ranks of the film industry rapidly. In 1925, by age twenty six, he was directing his first film, *The Pleasure Garden*. Truffaut suggests that "from [Hitchcock's] very first pictures on, there [was] a distinct impression that [he was] fascinated by the abnormal" (Truffaut 27).

Although Hitchcock essentially denies Truffaut's implications that he was aware of "sexual matters" and the "abnormal" at the onset of his career, Truffaut counters his denial by prodding at some abnormal relationships in his first films. Hitchcock saw these interactions as "rather superficial" and that he was "quite innocent at the time" (26-27).

In Hitchcock's interview he says something very interesting of himself and revelatory of his fame; when asked about *The Lodger* he responds, "*The Lodger* was the first true 'Hitchcock movie'" (Truffaut 30). Why is this significant? Hitchcock's external outlook of himself and his career not only made him a perfect publicist for himself, but also exceptionally able to reflect on his own works. It also helped him and others to separate the works that existed to fill quotas or act as catalysts of career advancement, from works that he felt were truly his. Hitchcock, then, became the first person to separate himself and his works from everyone else. His movies were not merely suspenseful, dark, deep, twisted, abnormal or any other familiar term or genre; rather they were "Hitchcockian" (J. Davis 10).

In *The Lodger* we see a very singular plot unfold, in an incredibly eerie and almost poetic way. Hitchcock effortlessly



approaches the horrifying revelation that serial killers exist and they are scary and they are killing people. At a time when most filmmakers were making comedies or vaudeville classics, Hitchcock was showcasing serial murders and passionate love affairs. In this film, *The Lodger*, Hitchcock captures a human emotion in a completely new way; fear. The audience sees the turmoil and the anxiety of the characters in the story and cannot help but to feel nervous for them. It also creates immense tension and anticipation in the viewer. The onlooker cannot help but wonder what is coming next, and "did he do it"? This was Alfred Hitchcock's strength. It was his "Hitcockian twist" (J. Davis 10).

In an article called *The Psycho Genius of Hollywood*, author Sam Tanenhaus extrapolates on Hitchcock's fame in light of recent films about the infamous director:

To say he's making a comeback would be misleading, because he never went away. Alfred Hitchcock's place in the pantheon of great directors has long been secure, thanks to the string of classics stretching from the 1930s... to the films that conquered Hollywood in subsequent decades. Stylish, literate, beautifully constructed, visually opulent, they showcased the period's most fetching stars... No popular filmmaker has been more admired by critics in his own lifetime.

His popularity and large volume of admirers were not only prevalent in his lifetime, but also after his death.

*The Lodger* would be an important beginning for Hitchcock, but just that—a beginning. He would develop his unique plot lines and twists throughout his career. In movies like *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, originally filmed and released in England in 1934 (Hitchcock later redid the movie for American audiences, released in 1956) Hitchcock further revealed his ability to craft a completely original plot where the characters are all real



and dynamic and not so different from normal people. One of Hitchcock's strengths, and strange filmmaking qualities, was his ability to craft villains that the audience almost wanted to like. His villains seemed to be just one prior decision beyond the invisible line that separates the good people from the bad. In *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, the leader of a political initiative to assassinate the head of state, is one of these Hitchcockian characters. He is almost sweet to his hostages, he is typically charming and jovial and he connects with the people around him. This movie was also the beginning of Hitchcock's "Classic Thriller Sextet" (Ryall 115). The genre that likely "enabled Hitchcock to discover a specific artistic identity after a decade or so of experiment in a variety of film genres," and would be where he would unleash the majority of his creative genius (115). Hitchcock had a profound impact on "the thriller" in cinema. From the onset of his career Hitchcock was making films that would challenge the current standards and display his unequaled and talented mind.

Hitchcock had an immensely unique upbringing that contributed to his style and he was undeniably talented, but what was the third ingredient of Hitchcock's fame? Hitchcock came into the film industry at precisely the perfect moment in history. His very artistic and unique mind was appreciated because of the rise of art cinema and free expression in film. Hitchcock's individuality and innovative nature catapulted him to heights he might not have experienced at any other time in history. He was not only appreciated, but he was completely original and able to come into the industry when it was fairly un-navigated.

British born, if the industry had been more domestically developed, he might have had no American influences on his early works and could have spent his entire career in his home country. The timing, however, made it possible for American films to be dominant while he was still developing his taste and appreciation for cinema.



In the course of his life Alfred Hitchcock became a legend. He created genuine, high quality works that solidified his influence on film even to this day. Without Hitchcock the thriller would not have achieved the status or the caliber that it has in present cinema. The twists and character expression are repeated and revisited in modern films often. Hitchcock, because of his unique personality, his impeccable talent and his timing in history, is a household name. The term "Hitchcockian" is a direct reference and tribute to the life, career and influence of Hitchcock's inspirations on cinema. It is not only safe, but also necessary to say, that Hitchcock had one of the most singular and profound impacts on the "movies" in history.



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